About the 2017 Census of Governments - Finance

Program name

Census of Governments - Finance

Purpose

This program is the only known comprehensive source of state and local government finance data collected on a nationwide scale using uniform definitions, concepts, and procedures. This survey obtains data on revenues, expenditures, debt and assets of counties, cities, township governments, special districts and dependent agencies when information is not available elsewhere.

Legal Authority and Confidentiality

Title 13 United States Code, Sections 161 and 182, authorizes the Census Bureau to conduct this collection and to request your voluntary assistance. These data are subject to provisions of Title 13, United States Code, Section 9(b) exempting data that are customarily provided in public records from rules of confidentiality.

Primary Customers and Users

Results of this survey are widely used by the United States Congress, federal agencies like the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) and Federal Reserve Board, state governments, other local governments, educational and research organizations and the general public. Major uses of local government finance data include:

- Development of the government component of the gross domestic product estimates
- Development of the national income accounts
- Development of personal income figures for state and county areas
- Development of the flow of fund accounts
- Allocation of certain federal grant funds
- Legislative research
- Comparative studies of state and local government finances
- Public and fiscal policy analysis/research

Products

- **Key statistics produced**

  All data, summary tables, and files are released on the Internet on an annual basis beginning with the 1993 annual data series. The key statistics produced for the Survey of Local Government Finances are tables for local government finances both for the United States as a whole and for each state including the District of Columbia. During the Census of Governments, we also produce estimates by type of government. Government types include: Counties, Cities, Townships, Special Districts and Schools.

- **Frequency of data products**

  Local government finance statistics are produced on an annual basis. Currently, this survey publishes data about 24 months after survey data is collected.

- **Geographic detail**

  Census of Governments - Finance data are collected from all government agencies within each of the 50 states, and the District of Columbia.

- **Publication level of detail**

  Census of Governments - Finance statistics are published at the national total level as well as by state total and by type within state.

- **Data dissemination**

  Currently, this survey publishes data about 24 months after survey data is collected. There is approximately two years between the reference period and data release. Revisions to published data occur annually for the next two years with five years of data being revised during each Census of Governments (years ending in "2" and "7").

Release and Revision Schedule

- 2018 Annual Survey of Local Government Finances – Initial Release – Summer 2020
- 2017 Census of Governments - Finance – Initial Release - October 31st, 2019.
- 2016 Annual Survey of Local Government Finances – Revised Release – December 2019.
- 2015 Annual Survey of Local Government Finances – Revised Release – December 2019.
- 2014 Annual Survey of Local Government Finances – Revised Release – December 2019.
- 2013 Annual Survey of Local Government Finances – Revised Release – December 2019.
- 2012 Census of Governments - Finance – Revised Release – October 31st, 2019.

In the event of an unplanned data revision, revised statistics may be made available under "*Updates*" or under "*Latest Data*." Internal Census Bureau policies are followed for notifying sponsors and primary stakeholders.

Contact Us

You may contact us by phone at 1-800-832-2839 Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time or email us at ewd.local.finance@census.gov .

Methodology

Survey Design

Target population:
The target population consists of all 50 state governments, the District of Columbia, and all active local governmental units (counties, cities, townships, special districts, school districts). There were over 90,000 such units in the current survey year. In years ending in '2' and '7' the entire universe is canvassed. In intervening years, a sample of the target population is surveyed. Additional details on sampling are available in the survey methodology descriptions for those years.

Survey Frame:
The frame for the 2017 Census of Governments - Finance was compiled from the Governments Master Address File (GMAF) updated by births and deaths in each year. All types of governments were included in the frame.

Survey unit:
The basic survey unit is the governmental unit, defined as an organized entity which in addition to having governmental character, has sufficient discretion in the management of its own affairs to distinguish it as separate from the administrative structure of any other governmental unit.

Survey maintenance:

- Newly incorporated governmental units ("births") general purpose governments and independent schools since the completion of the 2012 Annual Survey of Local Government Finance processing cycle that have been identified on the sampling frame were all added to the sample and assigned a census year weight of 1.0000.
- Disincorporated governmental units ("deaths") since the completion of the 2012 Census of Governments Survey of Local Government Finances processing cycle were removed from the sample.

Data Collection

Data items requested and reference period covered: This survey collects data on revenues, expenditures, debt, and assets (cash and security holdings) for U.S. governments. The 2017 Census of Governments - Finance questionnaire can be found here.

A survey year includes each individual government's fiscal year that ended between July 1 of the previous year and June 30 of the survey year. Therefore, survey year 2017 covers individual government fiscal years that ended from July 1, 2016 through June 30, 2017.

Key data items: All data items are key data items with the exception of exhibit codes.

Type of request: The 2017 Census of Governments - Finance is a voluntary survey.

Frequency and mode of contact: The following are important dates in the data collection process for fiscal year 2017:

November 2017 – Initial mail-out
December 2017 – Due Date Reminder
January 2018 – Follow up mail-out #1
February 2018 – Follow up mail-out #2
March– August 2018 – Telephone follow-up

Data collection unit: The basic sampling unit is the governmental unit, defined as an organized entity which in addition to having governmental character, has sufficient discretion in the management of its own affairs to distinguish it as separate from the administrative structure of any other governmental unit. The 2017 Census of Governments - Finance contained 90,749 local government units.

Special procedures: 27 states have central collection arrangements with the U.S. Census Bureau. These states get special mailings for all or specific types of government units within that state.

Compilation of Data

Editing: Editing is a process that tries to ensure the accuracy, completeness, and consistency of the survey data. Efforts are made at all phases of collection, processing, and tabulation to minimize reporting, keying, and processing errors.

Although some edits are built into the Internet data collection instrument and the data entry programs, the majority of the edits are performed post collection. Edits consist primarily of four types: (1) *consistency edits,* (2) *historical ratio edits* of the current year's reported value to the prior year's value, (3) *current year ratio edits*, and (4) *balance checks*.

The *consistency edits* check the logical relationships of data items reported on the form. For example, if interest on debt is reported, then there must be debt.

The *historical ratio edits* compare data for the current year to data for the prior year or prior census year. If data fall outside of acceptable tolerance levels, the item is flagged for further review. For example, the reported property tax for the current year may be compared against the property tax last year, if the reporting unit was in last year's sample. If it was not in last year's sample, the current year value is compared to the prior census year value.

The *current year ratio edits* compare one data item on the form against a different data item. If data fall outside of acceptable tolerance levels, the item is flagged for further review. For example, airport expenditure to airport revenue is a current year ratio.

Balance checks are checks of linear relationships that exist in the data. Debt flow is an example of a *balance check*. The ending debt must equal the beginning debt plus the debt issued minus the debt retired.

After all data are edited and imputed, they are aggregated. A macro-edit, or aggregate-level, review is conducted with current year state aggregates compared to prior year and prior census aggregates. Macro-level ratio edits and tolerance levels were developed using the current year data.

For the *ratio edits, consistency edits, balance checks, and macro edits*, the edit results are reviewed by analysts and adjusted as needed. When the analyst is unable to resolve or accept the edit failure, contact is made with the respondent to verify or correct the reported data. The results of the action are tracked with a data edit flag.

Nonresponse:

Nonresponse is defined as the inability to obtain requested data from an eligible survey unit. Two types of nonresponse are often distinguished, unit nonresponse and item nonresponse. Unit nonresponse is the inability to obtain any of the substantive measurements about a unit. In most cases of unit nonresponse, the Census Bureau was unable to obtain any information from the survey unit after several attempts to elicit a response. Item nonresponse occurs either when a question is unanswered or unusable.

Nonresponse adjustment and imputation:

The 2017 Census of Governments - Finance used imputation, which is the procedure for determining a value for a specific data item where the response is missing or unusable, to provide estimates.

Other macro-level adjustments:

No other macro-level adjustments are used.

Tabulation unit:

The most detailed level of unit used for estimation is the type of local government (e.g., county, city, township, special district).

Estimation:

Estimates are released in two formats: the downloadable file and the viewable file. The downloadable file contains estimates at the (state) by (item code) level for all item codes collected by the survey and defined as in scope for the relevant level of government. The viewable file contains estimates of higher level aggregates created by summing item codes at both the state and national levels.

Since 2017 was a census year all local government units are included as certainties and estimates are produced via simple tabulation. Unit level item code values are first summed to create the downloadable file. The aggregates in the viewable file were then produced as sums of the calculated item code totals published in the downloadable file. Discussions of estimation methods in non-census years are available in the survey methodology descriptions for those years.

Sampling Error:

The data for the census year are not subject to sampling and do not contain sampling error. The user should be mindful that the data for years not ending in '2' or '7' are from sample surveys and are subject to sampling error. Discussions of sampling error are available in the survey methodology descriptions for those years.

Nonsampling Error:

Nonsampling error encompasses all factors other than sampling error that contribute to the total error associated with an estimate. This error may be present in censuses and other nonsurvey programs. Nonsampling error arises from many sources: inability to obtain information on all units in the sample; response errors; differences in the interpretation of the questions; mismatches between sampling units and reporting units, requested data and data available or accessible in respondents' records, or with regard to reference periods; mistakes in coding or keying the data obtained; and other errors of collection, response, coverage, and processing.

Although every effort (as described in the Data Processing section) is made in all phases of collection, processing, and tabulation to minimize errors, the data are subject to non-sampling errors such as inability to obtain data for every variable from all units in the population of interest, inaccuracies in classification, response errors, misinterpretation of questions, mistakes in keying and coding, and coverage errors. Precise estimation of the magnitude of nonsampling errors would require special experiments or access to independent data and, consequently, the magnitudes are often unavailable.

The Census Bureau recommends that individuals using these estimates factor in this information when assessing their analyses of these data, as nonsampling error could affect the conclusions drawn from the estimates.

The Unit Response Rate (URR) is defined as the percentage of eligible sample that actually responded to the survey. In determining the unit response rate a unit was defined as a respondent if it provided information on at least one variable or if a CAFR was available. The overall unit response rate to the 2017 Census of Governments - Finance was 83.6% percent. All of the 50 state governments responded to the survey.

The Total Quantity Response Rate (TQRR) was calculated for four key variables (expenditures, revenues, debts, and assets) for each state and at the national level. This response rate is computed separately for each key variable by taking the weighted sum of the data provided by the respondents for the key variable and dividing this quantity by the weighted sum of the reported respondent data plus the weighted sum of imputed data for the key variable then the result is multiplied by 100. In census years, all weights are equal to 1.0.

Some item codes in the 2017 Census of Governments - Finance can take both positive and negative values. However, TQRRs that are calculated using both positive and negative unit values do not carry their usual meaning. For such surveys one solution is to calculate separate TQRRs for positive and negative values. Since ALFIN does not include enough units that reported negative item code values to calculate TQRRs for negative valued items, TQRRs are calculated for positive item values only. In survey year 2017 we calculated the following TQRRs at the national level for the four key variables:

Level of Government	Expenditures	Revenues	Debts	Assets
State & Local	96.1%	96.7%	96.5%	95.7%
Local	92.0%	93.0%	94.8%	91.6%